

**OPENING STATEMENT OF
RANKING MEMBER CHRISTOPHER SHAYS**

**“Is This Any Way to Treat Our Troops?
The Care and Condition of Wounded Soldiers at Walter Reed”**

Monday, March 5, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Over the past ten years, this Committee has investigated the care and treatment of our soldiers returning from battle. After each hearing, promises were made that things would get better.

Today we again discuss the care of our wounded soldiers. I thank each of the witnesses for being here to help us understand this process and where it's failing our soldiers. And, I especially thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing and continuing the efforts of this Committee.

Nearly 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln closed his second inaugural address with the following words: “[L]et us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations' wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan....”

“To care for him who shall have borne the battle.” Such was our duty 150 years ago and remains our duty today.

A number of investigations including our Congressional hearings have challenged whether that duty is being fulfilled. Reports of substandard conditions at Walter Reed Hospital have shocked and angered the Nation.

According to a recent *Washington Post* article, “[in] Army Specialist Jeremy Duncan’s room, part of the wall ... hangs in the air, weighted down with black mold,” and Building 18 is littered with “mouse droppings, belly-up cockroaches, stained carpets [and] cheap mattresses.”

On top of that, records are regularly lost, per diems delayed, and uniforms the injured left on the battlefield have yet to be replaced. For Sergeant David Thomas, that meant “[spending] his first three months at Walter Reed [Hospital] with no decent clothes.”

When we read these articles, we are appalled and ashamed because we know we have not fulfilled Lincoln’s admonition to properly care for our soldiers.

Regretfully, this is not new news. But, what we must discuss today is just how outrageously bad some of these living conditions are and why some patients are locked in a system that is failing to respond because of an incredible amount of red tape.

Besides poor living conditions, our soldiers are being smothered by a bureaucracy that is not helping them. And, so, we want an answer from the Administration, what are we going to do to make things right for our injured heroes?

Every day, our men and women in uniform—and it’s not lost on any one of us that many of these soldiers are just kids out of high school—put their Country before their families, their mission before their jobs at home, and their bodies before their futures. Every day, we ask our men and women in uniform to face death. And, they do this without question or hesitation because of their duty to their Country and their duty to each other.

In war, tragically, some are lost, and some are wounded quite seriously. And, how are some of our wounded repaid? Well, the photos of cockroaches and mold and mice droppings and crowded quarters got our attention, but this is only a small part of the story. The rest and more important part of the story is that our men and women are effectively incarcerated in outpatient clinics indefinitely because the bureaucracy is not responding to their needs on a timely basis.

It is understood but it needs to be stated by each of us time and again: our mandate to our war-wounded has not changed from the first days of our Nation. We—whether legislators or the Administration or the Military’s top brass—we as Americans owe an immeasurable debt to our men and women wounded and felled on the battlefield because they did their duty and fought to preserve the rights and freedoms we all enjoy.

When they return to the United States, their navigation through “the system” should be caring, straightforward, and timely, but it’s not. It’s time to fix this problem once and for all and to put Walter Reed and our soldiers back on the right path.

We have a tough and emotional hearing ahead of us today. And, I want to thank our witnesses from the Administration for their honesty and candor.

I want to state for the record that I recognize and value the incredible medical treatment our military personnel receive on the battlefield in Iraq and Afghanistan, in Germany, and here at Walter Reed. To put it simply, you perform medical miracles, and you give our wounded soldiers and their families hope and courage, and that is something each of us here on this dais applauds you for.

I also want to thank the wounded soldiers and their families for their patience, dedication, and sincerity. Each of you has demonstrated immense courage, and now we're asking you to show another kind of courage by speaking out about your experiences. You are heroes of the highest order for your service to your country on the battlefield and for your service to your fellow men and women in uniform who hopefully will never have to experience what you have had to endure.

Soldiers and families alike, you have borne the battle, and, now, as Lincoln proclaimed, let us strive to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nations' wounds and to care for you who have borne the battle.